



BETTER ADVENTURE STORIES FOR CHILDREN OF THE HIGHER AGE-GROUPS

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Let me confess at the outset that I am no psychologist. Having said that, let me come to the theme of my paper—"Better adventure stories for children of the higher age-groups." In order to write adventure stories which older children would enjoy, we, the writers of adventure stories, must not only know the nature of our craft—or, if you prefer, the tricks of our trade—but also the parameters within which we must work. At the same time, we should also possess a basic knowledge of the nature of childhood fantasy if we are to create adventures which children would accept.

What are the factors of childhood imagination that we have to take into account while writing adventure stories for

them? First, or so I have observed, the kind of detachment that adults display while reading fiction is absent in children. The world created by imagination, the characters, incidents and the milieu, are not real. They cannot be real, although they might appear to be so. An adult, whether immersed in a serious piece of literature or a popular paperback, is all the time conscious of this. For him, the line that divides reality from fantasy is unblurred; and thus, unless he be a child passing himself as an adult, there can be no absolute identification between him and the world into which the writer lures his young reader.

But in the case of children, the line divid-

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ing fantasy from reality is wafer thin. When the child slides into the world created by the writer, he does so with total involvement. He does not allow the logic of reality to intrude into what, after all, is fantasy. This is specially true of younger children. A young child has seen a mouse in real life and knows that it cannot speak. But when he comes across a mouse in a story that not only talks but displays human characteristics, he does not deny the possibility that such a mouse really exists. A barber at the zoo? Why, of course! Some zoo somewhere in the world must have got a barber who cuts the animals' hair, and gives them a shave and shampoo.

You may have occasionally come across a child who quietly steals away from the TV set when the suspense on the screen becomes unbearable. This may not be because the child is a coward, but because the situation dramatised on the screen is intensely real for him. This paradox of fantasy becoming a reality in the mind of a child was dramatically illustrated a few months ago. Three boys, not yet in their teens, had been apprehended by an alert railway security man at the Howrah station in Calcutta as they were about to board a train for Assam. On being questioned, they confessed that they were running away from home, their destination being Kaziranga, where they would be meeting Superman and He-Man. Their parents later admitted that nothing could convince the three boys that Superman and He-Man were just creatures of imagination and did not exist in flesh and blood.

Again, when a writer for adults distorts reality, or uses artifice for a specific purpose, a mature adult is always aware of such distortions. When Kafka's hero, for example, suddenly wakes up one fine morning to find himself metamorphosed into a cockroach, we appreciate the writer's allegorical intentions. Similarly, when

Jonathen Swift transports his Gulliver to a world of little people, 'little' both physically and mentally, we are conscious of the satiric purport behind the distortion. However, for children, such distortions are not departures from reality, but a part of reality itself. Ask your five year old daughter if an ogre can change itself into a mouse so that the cat can eat it. She would reply with contemptuous certainty, "Yes, of course he can, mummy." And think in her heart, "How ignorant adults can sometimes be."

Up to a certain age, childhood fantasy is not circumscribed by constraints of verisimilitude. This I have discovered from my personal experience. I had a group of youngsters, between 6-9 years of age, who would periodically coerce me into telling them adventure stories. Having exhausted my stock of such stories all too soon, I had perforce to invent an elephant named Khunkhu. Roll Superman, He-man, Batman, Spiderman all into one, and there you have your Khunkhu. I piled all the children onto Khunkhu's back and took them on the most unbelievable adventures. With Khunkhu, these children went to the moon, rescued a passenger liner on the Atlantic, fought raging forest fires in Canada, crossed the time barrier into the prehistoric past to battle dinosaurs. Each adventure was more outrageous than the one before, in fact, so outrageous that I would never dare to put it into print. Yet the children, unfazed by what an older child might call the ludicrousness of the stories, were absolutely thrilled, and clamoured for more.

Such liberation from the constraints of verisimilitude allows the writer of fiction for younger children infinite freedom to create, distort, manipulate and use artifices just as he wishes. He can take full advantage of the fantasising capacity of children to write the most imaginative adventures

for them. His publisher may not give him a fat cheque. But his child readers give him a kind of literary blank cheque, something not given to those who write for adults.

But, as the child grows older, he begins to impose restrictions on the writer. To create adventure stories which the older child will accept, the writer has now to curb his imaginative exuberance and impart a semblance of reality to his tales. The child, we must remember, is slowly but inexorably moving towards adulthood. Just as adults desire realism in fiction, so do the older children. Mind you, the fantasising capacity he displayed in his younger days is not totally lost. But his imagination has become more mature and he needs a dose of realism in order to give the world of fantasy created by the writer a more tangible shape. An older child would endeavour to relate the world of fiction to the world around him, just as an adult does. He may not be as finicky as an adult. The illusion of reality maintained by the writer might satisfy him. But gross distortion or highly exaggerated artifice are sure to put him off.

This again I have discovered the hard way. Alas, the children for whom I invented my super elephant, Khunkhu, have since grown older. Now they would be embarrassed having to climb onto his back and sally forth on incredible adventures! As a result, I have had to consign poor Khunkhu to the wastepaper-basket of memory.

At this point, you may raise a valid question. If a degree of verisimilitude in adventure stories is desired by older children, how come they get so hooked on the adventures of super heroes such as Superman and He-Man? Here we have an outrageous fantasy of a creature from a fictional planet called Krypton who acquires super powers when he becomes an earthling. We have a place called Eternia, a sorcery ridden world

peopled by weird creatures, and a weakling who has to draw on the power of his magical sword to become the strongest man in the universe. Why are older children attracted towards such patently absurd fantasies?

The answer lies in the very nature of such heroes and their adventures. It is no coincidence that most of such adventure tales are in the comic strip format, for such is the fantasising that children cannot imagine it without the aid visuals. If these adventures were narrated and not pictured, I doubt if they would have still attracted children. Moreover, it is amongst the older children that we find the tendency towards hero-worship. In fact, every child in his early teens has one favourite hero or the other, a cricketer, footballer, film personality or the like. It is this innate tendency towards hero-worship that draws to the comic book super personalities.

A writer of adventure stories for children, however, cannot afford the luxury of such fantasising. He has to anchor his fantasies to reality. He must deal in what is possible, though not necessarily probable. Of course, the world of the writer is one of subjective reality; the characters, situations and the milieu are the creations of his own imagination. But these must relate to the world of objective reality or they must appear to be real.

Creating this illusion of reality is, however, easier said than done. In fact, it is the single biggest challenge to the writer of adventure stories for older children and determines the quality of his fiction. The main dilemma here is that the basic plot around which the entire story revolves, which may be the thematic core, is itself intensely unreal. Three children in search of family jewels. A computer whizkid being kidnapped! An odyssey to recover a lost statue. How many children in their lifetime have ever embarked on such thrill-

ling adventures?

But then, the writer cannot weave a tale of adventure out of a plate of noodles. He must have something more substantial to bite into, an unusual, exciting plot through which he can create an atmosphere of mystery and suspense, place his hero or heroes in a position of peril and then bring them out of it in a dramatic climax. So, the thematic core around which his tale revolves will always carry an aura of unreality. Then, the best he can do is to remain within the realm of the possible, though not the probable. Whatever the thematic core he chooses, it should be something that does take place in real life, if it is to be invested with a degree of credibility.

But even though the thematic core itself is unreal, other factors integral to the story can be made to assist in lending it a degree of verisimilitude. For instance, if the writer can create a world with which the child reader can easily identify himself, half the battle is already won. The greatest asset in this is the use of a child or children as central characters. Children are more attracted towards characters with whom they can easily identify themselves. Hence, other children, however involved in fictions of thrilling adventures, would make it easier for them to indulge in self-substitution.

However, if the child characters are to impart verisimilitude to the story, they themselves must be credible. They must spring from the world depicted in the story, and not be imposed on it. Child characters who stick out like sore thumbs in the milieu in which they are placed run the risk of becoming ludicrous rather than real. The writer should also guard against the very real danger that his child characters may turn out to be super brats, with genius level IQs, cast in the heroic mould, able and willing to do anything and everything. Super brats not only destroy the credibility of a

story, but also induce a kind of 'inferiority complex' in the minds of the average child reader, thus hampering identification.

The child characters should, therefore, be ordinary children, intelligent and alert, but possessing no attributes that set them apart from an average child. Only in specific instances, where the plot requires it, should an exceptionally gifted child, or one with some special talent, or extraordinary faculty be shown. Most important, the children should behave in a set situation as children normally behave. They may react with fear, hesitate to run into danger, desire the security of their normal, everyday family life, or even burst into tears. To depict his child characters with a degree of realism, the writer must possess an intuitive knowledge of children, and a thorough familiarity with their behaviour pattern.

I am sure the writers of adventure stories among you are aware how much the presence of a father-figure in a story with children as central characters, helps to invest it with credibility. The father-figure can be anyone—parent, teacher, uncle or aunt, a policeman, an officer. Because this father-figure always steps into a situation which is beyond the children, he not only saves them from the imaginary peril in the story, but also from becoming super brats. Children, even older ones, have somewhat exaggerated notions of what we adults can perform, so the actions of the father-figure do not in any way infringe on verisimilitude.

Of course, by asserting that the presence of child characters enhances the realism of an adventure story and makes it more acceptable to children, I am in no way implying that we may not write adventure stories without child characters, or that we should not create heroes whom the child reader can look up to. But the requirements of realism should not be diluted in such

adventures, nor the heroes given such exceptional attributes that they become caricatures. Otherwise, there would be no difference between adventures written by writers and those churned out by the comic stripwallahs.

Another factor that leads credibility to the adventure is the authenticity of the background in which it takes place. To create an authentic background, the writer has to be thoroughly familiar with that background as well as the thematic core around which the adventure revolves. It would be wiser for him to remain within the realms of his own experience as far as the background is concerned. The thematic core, which of course is a part of his imagination rather than experience, can then be made more convincing. Also, familiarity with the background would help him in the accretion of details relating to that background which give it authenticity. This is also the reason why a good bit of research into the theme and background is a *sine qua non* for writing adventure stories. By delving deep into the subject, the writer can think of credible themes, characters and situations, which may be beyond the range of his personal experience.

This is specially true of what are called science fiction adventures, definitely the most difficult adventure stories to write. If the writers of adventure stories are thrice removed from reality as Plato (sic) so succinctly put it, the sci-fi writers must be ten or twelve times removed. They are dealing in fantasy in its purest form, and it is very difficult to lend authenticity to the fruits of their rampant imagination. Yet, authenticity can be given even to sci-fi stories, provided their creators are sufficiently familiar with science and have researched deeply into what would form the thematic core. Sci-fi adventures must be based upon genuine scientific presumptions if they are not to degenerate into the pseudo-scientific

fantasies dished out by the creators of Superman and Company.

The next question that every writer of adventure stories should ask him before putting his pen to paper. It should be created adventures only to entertain the young readers; or should there be a deeper purpose behind his writings? Since children are so readily drawn to well-told adventure stories, can these not be used to impart certain ideas and values that might help them shape their own lives for the better?

At this point, let me assert my intense dislike of overt didacticism in children's literature, adventure or otherwise. Children are lectured to everywhere at home, in the classroom, on the playground. Let us not add to their torment by lacing our stories with sermons. Unfortunately, many of us cannot resist the temptation of playing the preacher in our writings for children. And, equally unfortunately, adults always do not practise what they preach!

At the same time, I am convinced that good adventure stories can transcend their existence as mere entertainers if they have something more to offer to children. Without being openly didactic, through the actions and objectives of the characters, the writers can convey to children certain basic values—the meaning of friendship, sacrifice and courage, the never-given-in spirit, hatred of injustice and exploitation, abhorrence of social abuses, the necessity of keeping one's head in a crisis, love for animals, concern for the environment and so on. A seriousness of purpose not only enhances the quality of a writer's creation, but also sets it apart from the mindless fantasies cluttering our bookshops today.

Over five years ago, most of us present here today, had gathered at Delhi at a seminar conducted by the AWIC to express our determination to create an Indian tra-

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dition of written literature for children, and help in its promotion. Since then, there has been a palpable change in social attitudes towards children's literature and their practitioners. Organisations such as the AWIC have contributed a great deal towards this change. The situation today is

far more optimistic. More and more people are realising the value of good books for children and are willing to acknowledge that writing for children is a specialised, difficult task. But we have a long way to go yet. Let us do our bit to keep this wheel of change rolling by writing more and better books for children.